

General Pershing's Birthday at St. Mihiel

Announcing America's Arrival in Battle Line of Civilization

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IN AMERICAN HISTORY hereafter, in the history of the World War, September 12 and 13, 1918, will have a very real significance. On these days we began our actual participation in the European struggle as a full grown ally. The date corresponds to July 1, 1916, in the history of the new British army, the date on which Haig began the Battle of the Somme. Our own beginning was made away out at the other end of the line and our objective was St. Mihiel salient, which for four years had faced the Allies and in that time had become one of the really permanent landmarks in the whole front from the sea to Switzerland.

The Battle of St. Mihiel, for thus it is bound to be known, has three aspects: We must view it in relation to the larger strategy of Foch, and thus as a detail in the main campaign against Ludendorff, comparable with the various thrusts of Rawlinson, Horne, Byng, Mangin, in the other sectors; we must view it as a whole in itself, so far as the local field of operations was concerned; and, lastly, we must examine it as the expression in fighting terms of the meaning of our new American army, now graduated from necessary but not less irksome leading strings and making its bow upon the platform of the world struggle.

As for the relation of the struggle in Lorraine to the main battle, to the Battle of Northern France, since it is essential to look at the campaign now in progress as a single conflict, the explanation is simple. Foch was bound to retain the initiative in the whole western field. He had temporarily exhausted the possibilities of attack in the sectors between Rheims and Ypres. The enemy had, in some distress and at a great expense in men and material, retired behind the Hindenburg line, and any effort to get him out of that line either by maneuver or direct attack required time for organization. Meanwhile it was essential that the enemy should not have time to repair his situation, to recover from his disorganization. The strain must be kept upon him.

Making Him Bleed From Yet Another Wound

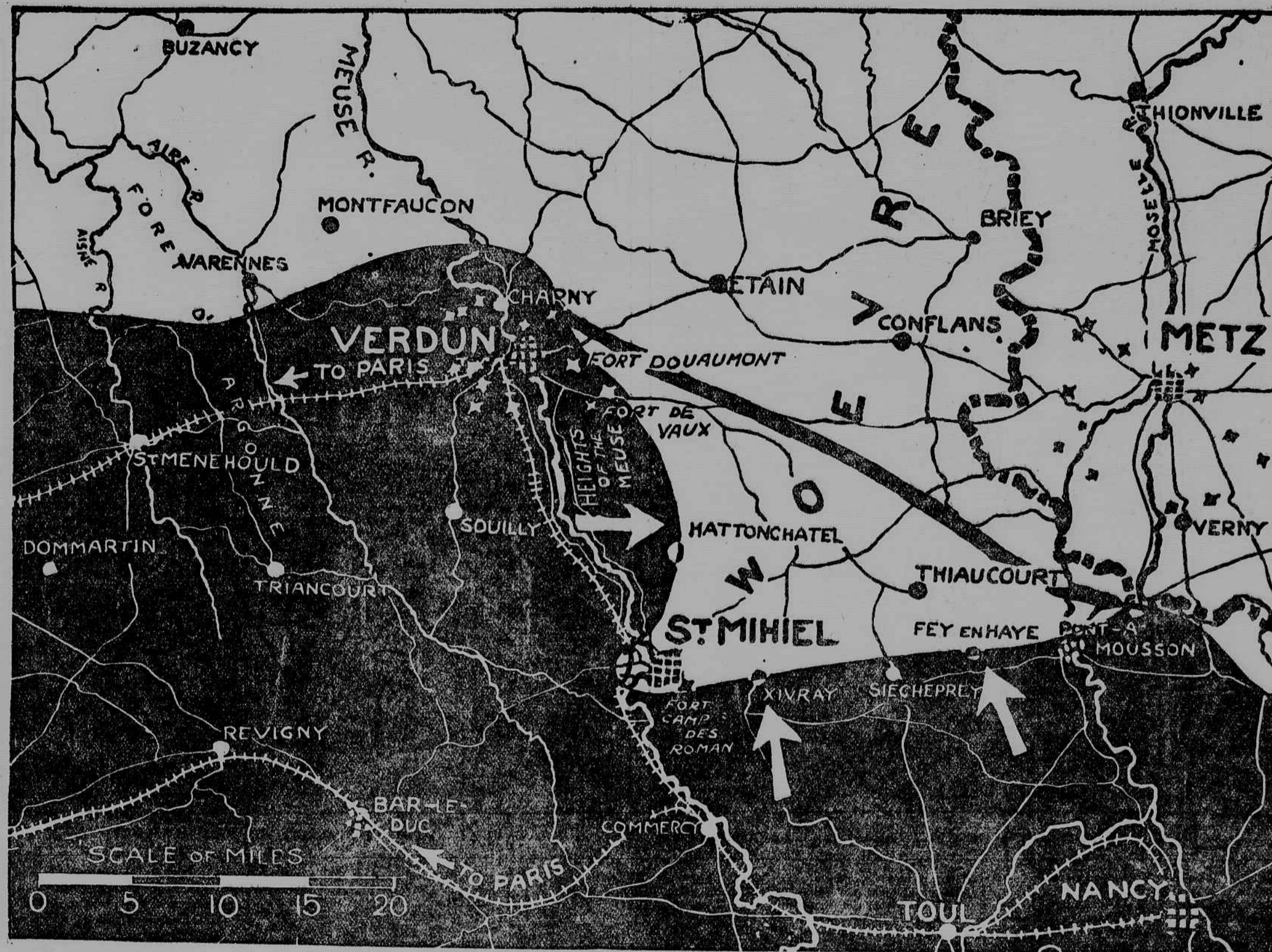
Wherefore Foch called upon Pershing to use the First American Army, the First in every sense, to make one more of the now familiar local offensives with a strictly limited objective, geographically, but having as its larger purpose adding to the ever growing burden of difficulty of the German by exacting a new loss at a fresh front; making him bleed from yet another wound when his need and his desire were to recuperate from old wounds; making him worry for the safety of a new sector when his necessity was to concentrate all his energies on existing perils.

So far as Pershing's battle had any larger objective, this was it. He was not starting for the Rhine or undertaking to capture Metz. Berlin or the moon would have been no more inaccessible at the moment. He was not even, in the larger sense, seeking any geographical objective. He was contributing to Foch's general scheme, which is to destroy the armies of Ludendorff by exactly the strategy which Grant employed with ultimate success against the South, namely, pressure everywhere, pressure all the time, blow after blow until the army itself is at last broken. It was not the capture of Richmond which won the Civil War; it was the demoralization of the Confederate army in Richmond, demoralization the consequence of which was that when Lee retired from the lines he had held so long and so gallantly and his army reached the open country it melted away.

Victory in this war can only come when Ludendorff's armies are so beaten that they lose their organization, their coherence, cease to be armies, and either surrender or disintegrate. Until this time comes no decision will be had in the war. Until it comes no geographical objectives have more than limited value, and that value is entirely comprehended in the relation these geographical objectives have to the main purpose, in the degree to which they make it easier for Foch to destroy the German armies and harder for Ludendorff to keep his armies in being.

And in the main operation, the "big game," as it may perhaps be described, St. Mihiel was obviously only a detail. We are in the stage of a bull fight when the worrying and weakening of the bull is still in progress, the time and the opportunity to kill have not yet arrived. We have got to wear the enemy out; he has been weakened by losses of material and men in half a dozen partial conflicts, partial because they were not and could not be decisive. St. Mihiel was to be one more. As such it was to be a splendid success, but it must not be mistaken for something more considerable. It bore the same relation to the whole battle of Northern France as the activity of a

THE ST. MIHIEL SALIENT



Arrows indicate direction of attack.

regiment bears to that of a division or a corps in a maneuver. It was a part and it had no separate and individual value.

In the second place we have to examine the history and geography of the St. Mihiel salient. Between the Meuse and the Moselle rivers in the old French province of Lorraine and north of the city of Toul lies a broad plain, the Plain of the Woëvre, relatively flat, marshy and strewn with forests and with small ponds or lakes. Going westward from the Moselle valley, from Metz to Verdun, for example, you cross this plain and arrive, half a dozen miles east of the Meuse, at the foot of an escarpment, a ridge wholly like the sand dunes rising along the seashore. The rise is abrupt—500 feet in places—and standing on this escarpment and looking out upon the plain at sunrise you have the impression of looking out upon the sea.

This ridge is known on the maps as the Heights of the Meuse (the Cotes de Meuse of French geography). It is obviously of real military value because it is the first natural obstacle to an invader coming east out of Metz and intending for the plains of Northern France. The French military books describe it as the "Dike of the North," and it fairly resembles a dike, stretched from the forts of Verdun to those of Toul. Along this dike the French had constructed various forts, covering the crossing of the Meuse and the entrance to the little valleys by which passage from the Woëvre to the Meuse valley was easiest. Vaux and Douaumont, the famous Verdun forts, are among those commanding the routes from the Woëvre to the Meuse.

The Bulwark Regains Its Old Military Value

In the Marne campaign the Germans did not attack this dike, because they came south out of Belgium and Luxembourg and thus got behind it, almost enveloping all the French troops from Verdun right down to Toul, who stood upon the dike facing both ways with enemy troops east and west of them. But after the Marne the Germans were thrown back from the country behind the dike to the line of Verdun-Rheims, and the bulwark regained its old military value. It covered the flank of all the French armies fighting west of the Meuse, it was the foundation of the whole western stretch of the French defense system.

Having failed at the Marne the Germans had in September, 1914, to reconstruct their plans, and they conceived of an operation which should seek to envelop Verdun. The Crown Prince was to come south, west of Verdun and across the Paris-Châlons-Verdun railway, another army was to come east out of Metz, break through the dike midway between Verdun and Toul, and the two armies were to join hands behind Verdun, surrounding it and presently capturing it.

By the third week in September this double thrust was well in progress; the

Crown Prince was driving south from Montfaucon and had taken Varennes. Meantime a German army had come out of Metz, climbed the Heights of the Meuse, half way between Toul and Verdun, broken through the dike, captured the little city of St. Mihiel on the Meuse, with the strong Fort Camp des Romains above it, and had forced the passage of the Meuse. On September 25 St. Mihiel fell and the Kaiser sent a message of jubilation to his wife, which thrilled all Germany.

But once more William was destined to be disappointed. Joffre had already begun his great turning movement between the Oise and the Somme, and in short order all available German troops had to be hurried from Lorraine to Picardy, to Arras and presently to Flanders. Here is an admirable example of the value of the initiative. Joffre had won it in the principal field at the Battle of the Marne. Before Moltke could regain it by an operation in a field still subsidiary Joffre employed it, still in the main field, and Moltke had to drop his own little strategy and run westward to prevent Joffre from reaching the flank and rear of all the German armies north of the Aisne.

As a result St. Mihiel disappeared from the battle news, and when the lines at last stabilized the Germans occupied this region a salient something like the still more famous British salient of Ypres, but larger and far more defensible, because while at Ypres the Kaiser's troops sat on the Messines-"Whitesheet" Ridge, as spectators sit on raised seats at a stadium, and looked down upon the British in Ypres the Germans at St. Mihiel occupied a portion of the Heights of the Meuse and at Hattonchâtel the highest crest of all the hills, nearly 1,400 feet above sea level and sweeping the whole Woëvre Plain. A spur of outlying hills to the south, moreover, gave the Germans a protected valley by which to reinforce their troops and munition them, and along this valley from Thiaucourt, where it met an existing railway, they constructed a strategic railroad to facilitate transport. Despite its odd shape, the character of the country thus made this St. Mihiel position one of the most defensible along the whole line, as the French were presently to find out.

We have seen that the St. Mihiel operation was originally undertaken in conjunction with an operation to the north, designed to envelop Verdun. It had not succeeded, but by the occupation of St. Mihiel and the little village of Chauvencourt, across the river, the Germans had cut the Toul-Verdun railway, one of the two lines serving Verdun which were vital to its defense. In the same fashion the Crown Prince at the north, while he had been checked, had come south far enough so that, when the moment came, he could with his long range guns forbid to the French the use of the Verdun-Paris railroad, and then Verdun would be without any adequate rail communication.

Here was the foundation of the German attack upon Verdun in February, 1916. In addition, holding Fort Camp des Romains, the Germans, likewise with heavy artillery, commanded the Paris-Nancy railway north of Commercy, but this was less serious for the French, because a detour line could be constructed around the zone of fire, borrowing existing lines to Gondrecourt, but at the least this added twenty or thirty miles to the distance between Paris and the eastern frontier and imposed certain handicaps on transport.

Recognizing the threat of the St. Mihiel salient to Verdun, Joffre, the moment his hands were free, sought in February, 1916, to pinch out the salient by an attack on its northern side, where it came down off the Heights of the Meuse into the Woëvre Plain. We had then the fighting about Les Eparges, which, after heavy losses, came to nothing. In the summer Joffre tried again, this time above Pont-à-Mousson and on the line between the Moselle and the Meuse, but his efforts came to nothing. The salient stood, and in the next winter it was an essential detail in the Verdun offensive of Falkenhayn.

The St. Mihiel Sector Was Quiet for a Time

After Verdun had been saved the French built a new railroad from Bar-le-Duc straight up to Verdun, out of range of German artillery, and the St. Mihiel salient lost its chief value. It was still a nuisance, but the French were unable to waste the men or pay the price in casualties necessary to reduce it, because the gain would not be sufficient to make the investment profitable. As a result St. Mihiel became a quiet sector, and as such it was used as the training front for several of our American divisions when we began to get to France in some strength.

When American troops in large numbers began to be available, however, St. Mihiel assumed a different aspect for the Allied commander in chief. He could now afford to spend casualties in taking the position, since by taking it he could improve his own communications, achieve certain necessary preparations for later and more considerable offensive operations, and in taking it he might inflict upon the Germans a defeat which would have a moral value and a loss in men and supplies, guns and munitions which would have a material value.

Accordingly Pershing was asked to reduce the St. Mihiel salient with these purposes in view: First, to make the enemy trouble in a new area and compel him to occupy reserves of men and guns in covering Metz and the adjoining Briey iron mines, from which Germany derived the larger part of her iron ore used in her manufactures, thus preventing him from using the same men and guns further west, where the main masses of the Allies were preparing further attacks; second, to abolish the German hold upon the Heights of the Meuse, which made

impossible a later Allied push out from Verdun to the all-important Briey iron district; third, to eliminate German hold upon the Verdun-Toul railway, which always carried with it a certain threat to Verdun and the German position upon the flank of any later Allied offensive east of the Moselle toward the Rhine, between Metz and Strassburg.

We shall see next year a great American offensive into Alsace-Lorraine, and such an offensive would be handicapped if the Germans still commanded the shortest and most direct line of communications between Paris and Nancy and also were in a position to strike at Allied communications from St. Mihiel. To take a parallel, before Haig began his great offensive in Flanders last year he had to seize the Messines Ridge, which gave the enemy observation and a convenient base for attack on his own troops preparing an advance. Thus, in a sense, St. Mihiel was the foundation of two later operations, one eastward from Verdun to Briey, another eastward from Nancy into Alsace-Lorraine. Moreover, the two might ultimately be combined into an enveloping movement around Metz, exactly like that which the Germans had attempted with respect to Verdun in 1914 and again in 1916. But again, it is necessary to recall that the main purpose had to the present, not the future, in view and to increase the difficulties of Ludendorff in facing the existing problem in the west.

The main attack of Pershing had naturally to be from the south side of the St. Mihiel salient, because here the ground was more favorable and the offensive could be made on a wider front, while owing to the tangled nature of the hills on the north side an advance on this side could only be made after the enemy had become weakened by the attack on the exposed side. The problem was simple in the extreme. Pershing had to advance a matter of eight or ten miles due north from the St. Mihiel-Pont-à-Mousson line; such an advance would cut all the lines of communication from Metz to St. Mihiel in the Woëvre Plain; meantime, a slight advance along the heights would cut the roads leading over the hills to the German rear.

If the two forces advancing behind the nose of the salient could meet, and their meeting place was Vigneulles, before the Germans could get out of the pocket; then the Germans in the salient would be trapped and have to surrender; in any event a large number of prisoners would be taken and a big haul of guns. But it was essential that the Americans should complete the ring behind the Germans, and do it promptly, because if the first assault were stepped the Germans would have time to retire out of the trap, even if they were unable permanently to hold the line. This was what happened in the case of the Marne salient; Mangin did get forward far enough to compel the Germans to retire out of the salient, but he could not advance far enough or fast enough to block

their retreat, and therefore most of the Germans in the Marne salient got away.

As it turned out the Germans were prepared to quit the salient whenever a serious attack should be made; they had withdrawn some of their heavy guns and they were expecting an attack, but they were not prepared for so heavy an attack or so swift a push forward, for when our American troops got started they broke all records in the pace they set and the distance they covered without any real pause. Thus all the German plans for an orderly retirement under pressure were upset; many thousands of prisoners and many guns were captured. But on the other hand a certain number of Germans escaped, because plans had been made for a prompt retreat.

After midnight on Thursday, September 12, our artillery preparation began, and at 5 o'clock our troops went in on the whole front from Xivray to Fey-en-Haye, south of the salient, and on a shorter front on the north side. Rather less than twenty-four hours later the attacking waves from the two sides of the salient met at the village of Vigneulles; the salient was thus abolished; all the German troops west of this noose were either prisoners or destined to become prisoners. The American line straightened out, facing eastward toward Metz, well beyond Thiaucourt; all of the German positions on the Heights of the Meuse had been taken; the line now ran straight from the Heights of the Meuse, near Vigneulles, to the Moselle well below Pont-à-Mousson.

American Overeagerness Proves Advantageous

Up to this point no local operation in the whole war had been a more complete success. American troops had shown a certain overeagerness which carried them beyond their objectives, but the Germans had disclosed a lack of determination which made the American overzealous advantage rather than costly. Seven German and Austrian divisions, upward of 90,000 men, had been engaged, nearly 25,000, more than a quarter, had been captured, and the total German loss must have exceeded 40,000 men, thus putting all seven divisions affected out of the reckoning for a long period of time, since their aggregate loss had been above 50 per cent.

In its larger phase the St. Mihiel battle was over on the second day, although the Americans were still pushing out toward that line which the Germans had constructed across the base of the St. Mihiel salient against just such an emergency as had now arrived. Meantime, French and American troops inside the new front were systematically "mopping up" the Germans in the old salient, whose road of retreat had disappeared. So rapid had been the retirement of "Fritz" that practically all of the thirty villages in the salient were intact. Secretary Baker and General

The American Offensive Paves Way for Drive in Alsace-Lorraine

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Pershing, with General Petain, were able to enter St. Mihiel on the Friday, Pershing's birthday, there to be welcomed by inhabitants who had been prisoners for four years.

Such in its vaguest outlines was the Battle of St. Mihiel, in which more Americans fought side by side than in any battle in our history; in which more men were engaged on both sides than in any battle in which an American army under an American general had ever fought, in which a larger uninterrupted advance was made in one day than in any one day of the four years of war on the West front, in which more prisoners were taken than in any twenty-four hours of the war on the French front, in which a larger area of French territory was liberated than in any equal period since the lines stabilized in 1914.

We shall do well to recognize the whole truth: we did not encounter picked German troops; we did not confront such obstacles as Mangin's army was fighting before St. Gobain. The enemy had prepared to leave the St. Mihiel district when he was attacked, and we are not to conclude that our troops are henceforth to prove irresistible wherever they strike or that they displayed a final mastery of modern warfare. To reach such conclusions is to open the way for future disappointments and disillusionment. But we did more than any military man, German or Allied, would have expected of an American army at this time last year, more than they expected when the offensive was planned, for we did all that could be expected at one bound. As they say in the newspaper world, there was no "second day story," the thing was complete in the first chapter, perhaps the best short story of the whole four years of war.

And we have a right to be proud, not for ourselves, but for our men, officers and soldiers. Siecheprey, Cantigny, even the Second Marne were brave and splendid achievements, but our part in them was either small or the affair itself inconceivable. In them was revealed the spirit of our men, but they were only a forecast of St. Mihiel. That was, as the British would say, our first "full dress show"; it entered America in the semi-finals of the World War as a real contestant.

A Victory Unsurpassed in Completeness

The moral value of the success, then, is incalculable. To have failed, on the military side, would have been of little consequence; even failure would have exerted pressure in a new field and partially accomplished Foch's purpose, but on the moral side failure would have brought discouragement to war-weary peoples in Europe, who are continuing to bear a strain, almost intolerable, because of their faith in what we are to do. But when, instead of failing, we did our part, briefly, utterly, brilliantly, began our war with a victory unsurpassed in completeness in the whole history of the warfare of positions, the "cliff" for our allies was immeasurable and promptly revealed. As for the enemy, for him St. Mihiel was also a portent, a reminder of what the Lusitania had meant in his history and in ours.

Looking to the future we shall do well to remember that our first victory has been won in Lorraine, and our task will not be completed until our armies have restored Metz and Strassburg, Alsace and Lorraine, to France. But laying aside the future for a moment, remembering all the doubts, hesitations, disappointments of the years since the war began, all the humiliations which the first years had for our own country, it is difficult to imagine a more glorious event than our victory at St. Mihiel, won in no small degree by soldiers coming from southern states; won in a measure by men representing many alien strains and not a few races, with some of whom we are at war; won as a result of the long training on European soil and in eager study of French methods; won by the use of weapons provided in some cases by our allies and in most cases modelled on our allies' weapons, but won by Americans, commanded by American officers and revealing in its progress qualities which are characteristically American.

In our own national history, therefore, as in world history, the Battle of St. Mihiel will have an enduring place. To the world it announced the arrival of America in her appointed place in the battle line of civilization; to Americans it means a reassertion of the fundamental unity and solidarity of the American people. The road from Concord Bridge to the heights above the Meuse is long, but it runs straight, and along it men are still led by the same love of liberty and service of democracy which was revealed in our first battle morning nearly a century and a half ago.